The American Legion Is Not Your Friend

BY

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The American Legion was created not as a space for former soldiers to meet and swap stories, but to bring together shock troops of the counter-revolution — an authoritarian mass movement of combat veterans.

The American Legion is celebrating its hundredth anniversary by launching a new recruitment campaign. “We Believe” ads have popped up across the country featuring younger and African-American Legionnaires, as the organization tries to strike a more modern pose to stem its declining membership.

The once-mighty veterans’ group faces a bleak future. The Legion still claims 2 million members, but its membership peaked at much higher than that after World War I, and it has closed a large number of branches or “posts” across the country over the last two decades. How successful the new recruitment campaign will be in revitalizing one of the United States’ oldest and, at one time, most powerful veterans’ organizations is yet to be seen.

The hundredth anniversary of the founding of the American Legion gives us an opportunity to reexamine its post–World War I origins, when the world tottered on the edge of an international workers’ revolution. The Legion was formed not as a harmless group where former soldiers could meet others like them and swap stories, but an authoritarian mass movement of combat veterans — shock troops of the counterrevolution.

1919: Revolution and Counterrevolution

1919 was a year of revolution and counterrevolution around the globe. The War to End All Wars began with rousing patriotic fanfare in 1914. But after years of mass slaughter and hardship, opposition to the war became widespread in all the belligerent countries. Mutinous soldiers and sailors began to bring the war to an end by toppling governments, first in Russia and then in Germany. But the Armistice only seemed to hasten revolutionary struggle.

British prime minister David Lloyd George wrote to French premier Georges Clemenceau at the time, "The whole existing order, in its political, social and economic aspects, is questioned by the masses from one end of Europe to the other." History appeared to be on the side of the revolutionaries, and the threat of revolution even spread to the American home front with the Seattle General Strike in February 1919.

On March 4, 1919, the Communist International (or Comintern) was founded in Moscow with the express purpose of building mass communist parties to spread the revolution beyond Russia's borders. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the October Revolution, told the Comintern delegates that "not only in Russia, but in the most developed capitalist countries of Europe, Germany for example, civil war is a fact . . . the world revolution is beginning and growing in intensity everywhere."

The guardians of the old order, however, were not going to sit idly by and be swept away. A ferocious counterrevolution gathered steam and began to push back hard against the revolutionary threat.

Counterrevolutionary forces killed thousands across Europe, including internationally known revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who were summarily executed in January 1919 by the Freikorps, the paramilitary units organized by the German army under the direction of the new Social Democratic government.

Two weeks after the founding of the Comintern, members of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF)—the US military forces stationed in Europe—convened a meeting of the American Legion "caucus" in Paris on March 15. These were no ordinary American soldiers, but officers drawn largely from the upper classes, led by Lt. Col. Theodore "Ted" Roosevelt, Jr, the eldest son of the recently deceased former president, Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt.

Interestingly, Ted Roosevelt and many future Legionnaires were behind the formation of a short-lived predecessor, "American Legion, Inc.," formed in New York from 1915–17 to push for US intervention in

the European war. Teddy Roosevelt was also a well-known advocate for US intervention. The pre-war American Legion was part of an upper-class military movement known as "preparedness."

There is a straight line that connects the pre-war preparedness movement and the post-war American Legion personified by the Roosevelt family. A notorious imperialist who hated radicals, and a favorite of American militarists, Teddy Roosevelt's spirit lived on in his son. Ted was considered the living embodiment of his late father and, along with other prominent officers, revived the American Legion in radically different circumstances: under the threat of global revolution.

Ted Jr and other senior AEF officers planned on recruiting heavily out of the officer corps of AEF — of the 450 registrants at the Paris meeting, only forty-seven held ranks below lieutenant. They hoped to build a national organization as quickly as possible, as the political situation back in the United States was, in their eyes, rapidly deteriorating. It is little wonder that with a class base like this, the Paris caucus cast a hostile eye on the American home front. According to the American Legion's official history, published in 1990:

> After the Armistice, A.E.F. members were made to engage in military maneuvers that seemed to them to be merely set up to occupy their time. And while they languished under a military regimen, they read of the Bolsheviks who were said to be at work in America in the mill and factory towns and big cities creating disturbances and causing other problems.

A semi-official history published in 1946 by Richard Seelye Jones added another factor behind the creation of the American Legion:

> There was a general concern about the postwar attitude of the average soldier toward political radicalism . . . A safe and sound organization of veterans might be the best insurance against their spread. This concern about a condition then covered by the term Bolshevism was to be voiced frequently during the formative period of the Legion.

The founding fathers of the American Legion had two goals: to return home and crush the militant workers' movement they saw as inspired by foreign radicals, and to prevent veterans from being influenced or organized by left-wing political forces.

The founding Legionnaires held a special contempt for the Industrial Workers of World (IWW), the revolutionary union known as the "Wobblies," whom they blamed for wartime dissent and the Seattle General Strike. Closely followed was the Socialist Party, which exploded to more than one hundred thousand members because of its opposition to the war, and whose best known and beloved leader, Eugene Debs, was sentenced to federal prison for speaking out against the war.

One Hundred Percent Americanism

The Paris caucus was quickly followed by a convention in St. Louis on May 9, where 55 percent of the delegates were officers ranging from generals and colonels to lieutenants and, again, were largely upper and middle class in background. The delegates' choice for their first "national commander" was Franklin D'Olier, a millionaire textile manufacture from Philadelphia who had risen to rank of lieutenant colonel during the war.

The St. Louis convention officially adopted the American Legion name and a constitution with the preamble "To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism." "One hundred percent Americanism" was the phrase most identified with the late former president Theodore, infamous for demonizing those Americans opposed to the United States entering the European war.

Roosevelt Senior was eager to spill blood in the European war and left no doubt about who the "enemy within" was. In an infamous speech in 1915, he declared:

> There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance.

Chicago Daily Tribune reporter Frederick A. Smith could barely contain himself while covering the St. Louis convention, writing:

> One hundred percent Americanism appears to have become spontaneously the watchword of the legion. The phrase has been used and reiterated during the three last

> days, and it finally lodges itself in the preamble to the legion's constitution.
>
> Aversions of the legion appear to be Bolsheviks, I.W.W.'s, conscientious objectors, political profiteers, and enemy aliens, who remain in this country at work despite the fact that Americans who fought are necessarily idle.

The *Tribune* was a virtual propaganda sheet for the Legion — unsurprising, given that its publisher, Col. Robert McCormick, was a WWI veteran and a Legion member. Nearly sixty-five of the delegates to the convention were publishers, editors, or reporters, virtually guaranteeing favorable press coverage from coast to coast.

The St. Louis convention closed with final remarks from Ted Roosevelt: "I want to say in closing that the only I regret is that my father could not have been alive at this time to see that actions of this body of Americans." A delegate from New York rose and asked for a moment of silence for the late president. He motivated it by declaring that Roosevelt was "the greatest statesman this nation has ever produced."

With that, the newly minted American Legion adjourned the convention. The delegates left St. Louis ready to do battle. "Leave the Reds to the Legion" became a national rally cry, according to historian Anthony Read, author of *The World on Fire: 1919 and the Battle with Bolshevism*:

> The existing patriotic societies welcome its [the legion] arrival as a powerful ally: its members had been conditioned by army service and training to love the flag and all it stood for, and to resist anything that threatened it or even dared to criticize it in any way.

With powerful supporters in the business community and the press, the Legion quickly established itself as an important political force in American life, with posts in every small town and multiple posts in large cities. Its membership soared to nearly 1 million by the end of 1919.

Founding Legionnaire Eric Fisher Wood told audiences across the country that the newly founded "American Legion will be the greatest bulwark against Bolshevism and anarchy." Congress gave their stamp of approval to the Legion when they issued it a federal charter in September 1919.

The War at Home

1919 was the biggest upheaval of the US working class up until that time. The strike wave began with the Seattle General Strike in February and showed no sign of slowing down. It was followed by the Great Steel Strike, the largest single industrial dispute in US history, and the Boston Police strike, which shocked the political class, because police were considered the first line of defense against radicalism and labor militancy.

In response, the great liberal President Woodrow and his attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer launched a nationwide Red Scare against radicals of all stripes and against the labor movement. Thousands were arrested, deported, or awaiting trial all across the country. Xenophobia and anti-communism ruled the day. It was in this atmosphere that the American Legion thrived. James Maurer, a leading Socialist Party member and president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor, recalled in his autobiography two decades later that:

> The year 1919 was the most tragic time for Organized Labor that I have lived through. Intolerance was rampant, constitutional rights were flagrantly violated, free speech was throttled, public and labor union meetings were mobbed, labor schools, labor union headquarters, and the offices of labor and progressive publications were invaded by mobs composed of American Legion members, disbanded sailors and soldiers, deputy-sheriffs, state police and just plain hoodlums. With the ending of the war labor was not merely to be defeated, it was to be crushed.

The day before nationwide May Day demonstrations calling for the release of Eugene Debs and other political prisoners, Palmer announced that recent bombings and the next day's demonstrations were part of a foreign-inspired plot to disrupt the country. The hatred of radicals by the political establishment reached a fever pitch — with some voices sounding genocidal. Mayor Ole Hanson, the mayor of Seattle during the General Strike, thought that the federal government should stop wasting time on conferences, "instead of cemeteries for the I.W.W." He told reporters:

> I trust Washington will buck up and clean up, and either hang or incarcerate for life all the anarchists in the country. If the government does not clean them up, I will. I'll give up my mayorship and start through the country. We will hold meetings and have hanging places.

The following day, soldiers, sailors, Marines, and veterans, along with the local police across the country, took their revenge on May Day demonstrators.

In Cleveland, Ohio, more than twenty thousand marched in support of Debs and other political prisoners that planned on rallying at the Public Square. They were led by Ohio Socialist Party leader Charles E. Ruthenberg, who recently emerged from a year in prison for anti-war activities. He later wrote about the events:

> When the head of the line was within a block of the Public Square the first trouble occurred. An officer in the uniform of the Red Cross jumped from a "Victory" Loan truck and endeavored to take a red flag which a soldier in uniform was carrying at the head of the procession. A scuffle followed in which other soldiers from the truck and some businessmen joined.

The police then attacked. Two hundred were injured, 120 arrested, and four demonstrators were killed. The IWW claimed that the tanks used to attack the demonstration were seized from the recently defeated German Army.

The level of state-sponsored violence was extraordinary, but it's the role of soldiers and ex-soldiers against the May Day demonstrations that foreshadowed much of the American Legion violence in the coming years.

The most infamous episode of American Legion vigilantism in 1919 was in the remote logging town of Centralia, Washington. For years, the Wobblies had been organizing lumber workers throughout the Northwest, and they faced constant police and vigilante violence. On the one-year anniversary of the Armistice, the newly formed American Legion post called for a demonstration that would pass by the IWW hall in Centralia. The Wobblies expected the hall to be invaded by the Legionnaires. They armed themselves while their lawyer, Elmer Smith, told them they had a legal right to self-defense.

When the march paused in front of the IWW hall, armed Legionnaires crashed through the front door and invaded. The Wobblies fired in self-defense. American Legion post commander Walter Grimm, a veteran of the AEF in Serbia to fight the Bolsheviks, and three other Legionnaires were killed.

Wobblies were hunted down throughout the Northwest and arrested in large numbers. IWW member Wesley Everest was lynched by Legionnaires, his hung body riddled with bullets. It was later cut down and tossed in the local jail in front of arrested Wobblies.

Amnesty meetings for imprisoned Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs and other political prisoners were targeted by Legionnaires all across the country. In Reading, Pennsylvania, which had one of the

strongest local socialist movements in the United States, Legionnaires literally invaded the city to prevent a Debs amnesty meeting.

The American Legion mobilized to shut down the meeting. According to Maurer, "truckloads of former service men were gathered in from the rural district." On his way to the meeting, Maurer passed by a number of street meetings "that were being harangued by strangers who told their listeners that it was their duty as good patriots to drive every last Socialist out of town."

When he got within a half a block of the Labor Lyceum, where the meeting was to be held, Maurer was shocked to see nearly five thousand anti-Socialist demonstrators. They were led by four hundred Legionnaires.

The Labor Lyceum was protected by an impromptu defense guard. "Standing six deep were about two hundred of my associates, a third of them returned overseas men, armed and ready for trouble," wrote Maurer. Faced with such a large, hostile, Legion-led mob, the organizers canceled the meeting. The *New York Times* reporter on the scene wrote, "The announcement that the meeting would not be held probably averted a riot." This was at a time when the American Legion's violence against socialists, communists, Wobblies, the National Nonpartisan League, and pacifists were not reported in the press.

Historian William Pencak paints a vivid portrait of the trail of political violence by the American Legion during the years 1919–20:

> Eastern and Midwestern Legionnaires had little difficulty in crushing Socialists and Communists as their West Coast comrades did in attacking Wobblies. In 1919 and 1920, Legionnaires raided Communist party headquarters in Columbus, Ohio, attacked Socialist halls in Cincinnati and St. Louis, and silenced Socialist speakers in Philadelphia and Springfield, Massachusetts. They rallied to prevent Socialist Congressman Victor Berger from addressing crowds in Milwaukee, the Bronx, and Providence, and broke up Young Socialists in Bayonne, New Jersey.

By the end of 1919, the Legion had proved itself to be such an effective weapon against radicalism that it caught the eye of top businessmen across the country, especially in Chicago, the site of many labor battles and the long-standing center of American radicalism. On December 23, Thomas E. Wilson, president of Wilson & Company, one of the largest meatpacking companies in the United States, chaired a meeting of representatives from other "stockyard interests" and voted to raised $10,000 for the American Legion.

The day after Christmas in 1919, Nathan B. Higbie, a high official in the Chicago-based Swift & Company, circulated a fundraising letter on the official company stationery:

> We are all interested in the Legion, the results it will obtain, and the ultimate effect in helping to offset radicalism. It is very important that we assist this worthy work, and at the meeting I was asked by the chairman to write to the different stock yard interests for their contribution.

Higbie asked other stockyard executives for $100 donations apiece; checks were to be payable to Thomas E. Wilson. It was 10 percent of the $100,000 that Illinois businessmen were to contribute to the Legion (worth more than $1.5 million today).

Strikebreaking became an integral part of the Legion's activities, gaining them further notoriety. The *New York Times* reported that a leading New York Legionnaire, Lorillard Spencer, the chair of the Americanization committee of New York County, told their reporter:

> The Legion will act only when it is clearly established that the emergency is inspired by radicals and only in cases where there in inconvenience to the public. No sides will be taken in ordinary labor disputes.

Spencer's "Americanization" committee indexed all the skills and trades of Legionnaires so workers could be supplied as scabs to any employer. In a time when all strikes were attacked as "Bolshevik"-inspired, the distinction between a "radical" strike and an ordinary one didn't exist.

The Legion's violent activities may have been played down by the mainstream media, but it was extensively covered by the radical press, including the *Nation*. Arthur Warner's four-part series "The Truth about the American Legion" in July 1921 remains an important source for documenting the Legion's reign of terror.

Mussolini on Their Minds

1919–1920 set a pattern for the next few years. State-sponsored persecution was augmented by the American Legion, or, in many places, Legionnaires spearheaded the attack on socialists, communists, the IWW, and other radical labor and political activists. Not surprisingly, when some of the top leaders of the American Legion looked around the world for friends and allies, they closely identified with the Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini, who came to power in 1922.

That same year, Alvin Owsley, the national commander of the American Legion, praised Mussolini and added, "If ever needed, the American Legion stands ready to protect our country's institutions and ideals as the Fascisti dealt with the destructionists who menaced Italy!" When asked if he meant by taking over the government, Owsley responded without hesitation,

> Exactly that. The American Legion is fighting every element that threatens our democratic government — soviets, anarchists, I.W.W., revolutionary socialists and every other "Red" . . . Do not forget that the Fascisti are to Italy what the American Legion is to the United States.

In response to Owsley's flirtation with Mussolini, another group of veterans attempted to counter the American Legion's dark influence. In an article published in the *New Majority*, the newspaper of the Labor Party of Cook County, led by John Fitzpatrick, the head of the Chicago Federation of Labor, the World War Veterans warned :

> The ex-soldier swings the Fascisti club in Italy. Shall he swing it here? There are 3 million unorganized ex-servicemen in America. Reactionary organizations, subsidized by bankers and Chambers of Commerce, are trying to inveigle them under their control. With strong financial backing they are enabled to spread their lying propaganda through numerous publications.

The World War Veterans declared:

> There is one ex-soldiers' organization that declares fearlessly for industrial and political freedom and real law-abiding Americanism. We of the World War Veterans live up to our principles. Our record is clean — so no banker contributes to our welfare; no government

> diverts funds to our treasury. Help us save the nation from disaster and reversion to medieval feudalism. Back us in our fight for liberty, justice, and progress.

Unfortunately, little is known about the World War Veterans. It appears that they got started late and couldn't stop the juggernaut of the American Legion. The Legion got started earlier and had all of the advantages of being sponsored by a section of the political and military establishment. It also had the advantage, along with its close cousin the Veterans of Foreign Wars—many people confuse the two, and they've had overlapping memberships over the decades—of being a recognized civilian lobby for veterans' benefits and affairs.

Challenging the American Legion

The World War Veterans faded quickly into obscurity, but it would not be the last time that liberals, socialists, and other radicals attempted to organize veterans, and challenged the American Legion. During World War II, liberal veterans started the American Veterans Committee (AVC), and its prospects for growth appeared favorable.

By 1947, the AVC grew to 100,000 members, but the Cold War and a renewed Red Scare at home wrecked the organization. The AVC expelled Communist Party members from its ranks, but this didn't save it from being mercilessly red-baited by the Legion and its political allies. It was reduced to a shell of an organization.

The Vietnam War proved to be a turning point. The massive public opposition to the war produced significant opposition inside the military, especially among black soldiers. The American Legion and the VFW's pro-war positions became anathema to much of the population. A sizable number of veterans became radicalized by their combat experiences. Out of this grew Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW).

Though VVAW was not a service organization and large in number, it was the most important political development among American veterans since World War I. It effectively assumed leadership of the Vietnam Anti-War movement in the latter years of the war.

We should keep in mind, as Kathleen Belew has documented in *Bring the War Home*, that many Vietnam Veterans were also virulently anti-communist and played an important role in the formation

of the white nationalist far right in the 1970s through the 1990s. Sadly, since the end of the Vietnam War, the biggest story for working-class people, whether veterans or not, has been the lack of any political or trade union organization to fight for them. The makeup of the veteran population has also dramatically changed. According to the Pew Research Center:

> Gulf War-era veterans now account for the largest share of all U.S. veterans, surpassing Vietnam-era veterans in 2016, according to Veterans Affairs' 2016 population model estimates. As of last year, there were 6.8 million American veterans who served during the Vietnam era and 7.1 million who served in the Gulf War era, which spans from August 1990 through the present. (Some veterans served through both eras.)

This means that the current generation of working-class veterans has suffered not only the particular problems of combat veterans, ranging from long- and short-term medical care, disability issues, mental-health struggles and care, and social isolation. Veterans of color suffer racism in care and treatment, and from the police forces; undocumented veterans face deportation with devastating impact on themselves and their families. Women veterans struggle with the legacy of sexual assault and harassment. All of these experiences are in turn shaped by four decades of decline in working-class life in the United States. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that far too many veterans are influenced by the Islamophobic and xenophobic ideas that are common currency among the US population, and as a result are attracted to far-right politics.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity today to put forward working-class socialist politics to one of the largest veteran populations in US history, in the midst of a growing socialist movement and a working class that has rediscovered the strike. Groups like Vets for Bernie — and upcoming fights to fully fund and expand veteran health care —can provide us with a new framework for veteran politics. The Left must provide that alternative. The ugly history of the American Legion in the post-WWI era tells us that if we don't, the Right will.

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Joe Allen's latest book is *The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service*.

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